

【연구논문】

Selling Political Brands and Building Candidate Relational Equity in American Campaign Tournaments

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Introduction

In the academic atmosphere of political communication where heuristic theoretical approaches are prevalent, political candidate brand building and brand battling are no longer theoretically new concepts or practically elective options, but rather they have become important components of modern political campaigns and elections since politicians and campaign practitioners have heavily adopted marketing strategies and exercised them in the arena of American political communication in 1980s (Adolphsen 2008; Lilleker 2006, 36; Newman 1991; Scammell 2007). Along with these adoptions in American campaign strategy, voters are also becoming more rational and sensitive to “why” and “how” important their candidates are to them. As Westen (2007) pointed out, Ronald Reagan’s 1984 political ad for reelection, “Morning in America,” created a powerful brand of

optimism for the American dream as it related to his next presidency. As the positive identity, resonance, and upbeat tone stayed in Americans' minds, candidate association or branding was embedded in voters' political brains and was ready to be utilized by incoming political messages (Westen 2007, 73).

Scholars have found complicated processes and multi-dimensional factors in political communication. Political candidates' communication patterns, contents, styles, and images in televised debates and political advertising have mixed and various effects, and the campaign effects vary by candidates' strategies in different political contexts and voters' demographics and their political affiliations. The political messages deliver both the personal images and the professional policy positions of the presented candidates, and the messages tend to increase voters' political information efficacy. Negative content increases the public's cynical attitudes, and incoming political messages intensify audiences' preexisting attitudes toward candidates, but the degrees of effects vary by voters' levels of political knowledge and their strengths of partisanship (Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert 2001; Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992; Kaid et al. 2007; Westen 2007). Therefore, it is not achievable to comprehend how campaign messages are processed and reach certain conclusions by using a single predominant model, especially from the ad-hoc and top-down perspective of the information sources (e.g., political candidates and parties) and distributors (e.g., media channels and campaign formats).

Scholars in the fields of political science and communication have admitted the limitations of conventional approaches based on a single factor of partisanship, a one-way information flow from the information

sources to the receivers, and sole rational choice models from the calculation of input to output. The conclusions reached by these traditional approaches and measurements have greater shortcomings to predict current political outcomes and consequences due to the dynamic processes of political decision-making, the broad and interactive networks in political communication, and the nonlinear input and output of political information in the new communication era (Bennett and Manheim 2006; Dahlgren 2005; Scammell 2007; Wang 2007).

Those ad-hoc traditional approaches become problematic when the models need to explain gradual effects of multi-strategic campaign effects, such as televised debates. The series of televised presidential debates have been proven to be the most salient campaign strategy (Kraus 2011). However, the theoretical understanding of the series of televised presidential debates has been even more limited than other types of political communication. In the American campaign system, the series of televised presidential debates take place in the last one or two months of the final campaign before the election. Due to the fixed exogenous political system, therefore, scholars are often even more reluctant to explore the endogenous gradual effect of the televised presidential debates within voters at the very end of the campaign. In order to understand the campaign effects of voters' gradual endogenous changes through a series of political events, voter-oriented post-hoc theoretical adoption is required. Westen (2007) supports the voter-oriented approach arguing that one of the most strategic and consistently valid campaign tactics is to understand voters' minds rather than simply informing or educating them using a specific method or form of campaign (Westen 2007, 75).

The current study employs a voter-oriented perspective, borrowing the theoretical and practical applications of the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model from the field of marketing, and examines how voters gradually learned about, perceived, reacted to, and associated with their political candidates from presidential candidates' brand building through the sequentially televised debates. By incorporating this voter-oriented approach to understand how candidates' efforts are evaluated and perceived by voters, this study proposes a new model to provide a post-hoc tool to explore gradual changes of voters' minds by sequential campaign events. The study observed that a series of televised debates can help political candidates build their political identity in voters' minds, remind voters what the candidates have achieved, and stimulate them to respond to their political potential and campaign promises. However, candidates' strategic performance through multiple debates alone cannot guarantee a successful building of a loyalty relationship with voters that would engender voters' attitudinal attachment and consistent support.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Political Brand Equity Building in the Campaign Battles

The theory of branding originated from the field of marketing and started to gain significant academic and practical popularity in marketplace management in the early 1990s (Scammell 2007). It became one of the core strategies to maximize given assets and limited resources beyond the boundaries of the fields of marketing

and management, and it has been widely applied to non-business human interactions (Newman 1991). Brandings are intangible equities and vibrant processes intended to make targets immediately recognizable, gradually likable, consistently trustful, and eventually desirable in broader arena (Keller and Lehmann 2006; Wheeler 2006). Just like what strategic marketers do for their commercial products, in the process of political communication, political candidates, as image and policy sellers, also create their own unique brands to differentiate themselves from other competitors and to be more appealing to voters utilizing strategic communication, and thus eventually win an election (Adolphsen 2009).

In political campaigns and elections, voters perceive not only congruent but also conflicting images and values about a target subject and individual, and they continuously build up the image of a political candidate and construct attitudes toward the candidate (Barnett, Serota, and Taylor 1976). Political candidates and voters try to adjust their political personalities, characteristics, and preferences to create meaningful brand values and relationships in the same way that advertisers and consumers interact (Blackston 1993; Graeff 1997).

Cognitive and emotional interactions between target brands and consumers are an important parameter of political branding research. Individuals “posit cognitive accessibility” to public figures in a variety of ways due to their different levels of emotional interaction (Druckman and McDermott 2008, 297). Therefore, “incorporating emotion into studies” (299) is a necessary process to understand individuals’ cognitive framing and the consequences of liking and disliking targets. Moreover, preexisting emotions “amplify or depress

a frame's impact" (289). Druckman and McDermott (2008) also argue that individual's behaviors are more likely to reflect his or her preferences as the individual's confidence in the preferences increases, and increased confidence in a preferred target induces congruent information seeking against opposing information and persuasion. Although both the policy positions and the personalities of candidates play dynamic roles in voters' political brains, a number of researchers have suggested that voters' emotional connections with candidates and their positive images of the candidates are stronger predictors of voting behavior than candidates' factual issue stances and impersonal personalities (Kaid et al. 2007; Smith 2001; Westen 2007, 119).

Due to implicit and unstructured candidate branding effects (Milewicz and Milewicz 2014), voters' perceptions are not always quantifiable even when accounting for their cognitive variability (e.g., opinion strengths and knowledge levels), emotional interaction, and different demographic characteristics. The effects of candidates' intended symbolic signals on voters' perceptions of them, conveyed through their tones of voice, facial expressions, representative colors, values, and body gestures, are a totally different level of non-paradigmatic scholarly research. The campaign itself is a very unstructured process, and the process and outcome are even more difficult to trace with a consistent theoretical application (French and Smith 2010; Shaw 1999, 345-346; Smith and French 2009). Despite increasing interests in the area of political branding (Reeves, Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006), therefore, there has been limited research on political candidate branding and no general theoretical models to apply to various types of political branding in order to

examine the effects of branding in the campaign and election processes (Smith 2009; Smith and French 2009).

As a result, more comprehensive but consistent theoretical tools and mechanisms that can explain multiple factors and consequences have been sought. Although they are still experiential approaches, heuristic models absent of core theories for political branding research have been investigated in recent scholarly research. Scholars have attempted to extend the research parameters beyond the boundaries of conventional studies that are often limited to candidates' professional characteristics and voters' demographic factors. As ways to overcome the weakness in the research of political branding with limited theories and experimental approaches, borrowing the wisdom of classic studies within and outside of the field of political science and incorporating those inter-disciplinary approaches can generate plausible applications and provide new insight into political branding research. This study attempts to adopt a consumer-oriented brand building model from the field of marketing, the origin of branding theories, and develop a new model of a voter-oriented interactive brand building to be utilized in the field of political communication. This constructive approach thoroughly embraces the multi-dimensional cognitive and emotional factors in campaigns and elections as a post-hoc tool and helps us understand the unstructured consequences of political brand building from voters' perspectives.

Application of the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model to Voter-Based Candidate Relational Brand Value Building

Keller (2001) proposed the model of brand equity building in

consumers' progressive relationship with a target brand from the perspective of consumers, which starts from the awareness of identity and ends at the creation of intense relational association. To reach the ultimate goal of persuading consumers to support and engage in the target brand, each stage of brand equity building is supposed to be achieved before moving forward to the next stage of brand equity building. Keller's customer-oriented sequential approach provides a linear and procedural theoretical perspective. The model was designed to practically apply to diverse targets and circumstances with both the depth and the comprehensiveness of rational and emotional consideration (Keller 2001). The multi-dimensional and exhaustive implications of Keller's model provide a very adaptable perspective on how and what voters learn and gain from political candidates' gradual brand value building in political battles, and it is well suited for the dynamic circumstances of political campaigns and elections. More importantly, Keller's information receiver- and customer-oriented perspectives resemble voters' perceptions and choices as post-hoc consequences of political actors' performances and other contextual and demographic factors. This theoretical application provides a linear, comprehensive and consistent theoretical interpretation in the field of political communication.

The current study adapts the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model by Keller (2001) to develop a model of Voter-Based Political Candidate Brand Equity. In the process of brand building described by Keller, the first step is to establish a shared brand identity, the second step is to create a favorable brand meaning, the third step is to elicit a brand response from consumers, and the last step is to

forge a brand relationship between brands and consumers. As business marketers invest their resources to build a brand desire for their products in consumers' minds (Keller 2001), political candidates and campaign practitioners spend their resources in order to resonate with their voters by creating affective and interactive political brand values. This study directly applies the concepts and definitions of each stage of Keller's brand equity building model (2001) to the gradual stages of political candidates' relational brand value building processes with voters (see Figure 1).

Identity

According to Keller's model, the first stage of brand equity building is to create brand identity, which means knowing "who you are" (Keller 2001, 5). At this stage, advertisers make their brands appear to be more salient, recognizable, and distinguishable in consumers' minds (Keller 2001). In political campaigns, this stage can be implied when political actors establish and strengthen their political identities to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Political candidates need to provide voters opportunities to learn about who they are. In his marketing research, Keller explained that the concept of brand identity can be broad, implicit, and elaborately evaluative, and a successful brand identity makes consumers to think of the brand in various situations (2001). In political contexts, this concept consists of anything that makes voters recognize a candidate as a political leader in various policy issues and political circumstances. A political candidate's name, image, symbol, and personal or professional characteristics can be the dimensions of the

brand identity. For example, like Campbell's soup as a warm and homely side dish at an ordinary American family dinner table in consumers' minds (Keller 2001, 9), Barack Obama's "change" and John McCain's "maverick" descriptors were their political brand identities in voters' minds during the 2008 presidential campaign (see Figure 1).

Meaning

The second stage of the brand equity model is to create brand meaning, which means understanding "what you are." Brand meaning is about "performance and imagery" (Keller 2001, 9). In marketing, it is consumers' knowledge about brand quality and experience with the brand (Keller 2001). In political battles, a candidate's political brand meaning can be interpreted as his or her functional political performance as well as abstract imagery in the past, and it is created when voters learn about the candidate's performance in his or her political history and the candidate meets voters' political needs and expectations. In other words, the reliability, trustworthiness, effectiveness, and efficiency of a candidate in his or her previous political work history, and voters' political experiences with the candidate are important criteria for brand meaning. In addition, as Keller made a note in his model (Keller 2001), and as other political communication scholars have emphasized (Jamieson 2015), factors like candidates' looks, lifestyle, popularity, personality, and other circumstantial situations can contribute to creating political meaning. In this stage, political candidates need to send strong, favorable, and unique signals to their voters about what they have done. Parallel to

the brand meaning of Coke as refreshment and Michelin as safety in consumers' minds in marketing (Keller 2001, 13), the examples of brand meaning in political campaigns can be voters' perceptions of Bill Clinton's successful handling of economy as an incumbent candidate in the 1996 second-term presidential election, and voters' views about Mitt Romney's thought-out interpretation of abortion policy in his previous governor office in the 2012 presidential campaign. Once voters see the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of a political candidate and complete building some level of relational brand meaning, they start to respond to the candidate (see Figure 1).

Response

The third stage is to activate brand response and stimulate positive feedback from the target audiences. At this stage in marketing, customers respond to brands with both their "head" and "heart" and understand "what I think or feel about you" (Keller 2001, 13). A brand needs to cultivate consumers' positive "judgment," "preference," "approval," and "gravity" to get consumers' response to accomplish this stage (Keller 2001). In the political campaign process, this is the stage in which political candidates bring out voters' desirable responses to their campaign promises. With some level of rationale and emotion, voters make judgments and evaluations of a political candidate's qualifications, credibility, competency, and likeability, and then they react to the candidacy. Understanding from Keller's examples of Nike and Starbucks as successful brands that move both the "head" and "heart" of people (Keller 2001, 22), voters' positive

responses to candidates' political promises, such as Obama's '*Clean Energy Plan*' in the 2012 campaign and George W. Bush's '*No Child Left Behind Act*' in the 2000 campaign can be the examples of relatively well cultivated political brand responses (see Figure 1).

Relationship

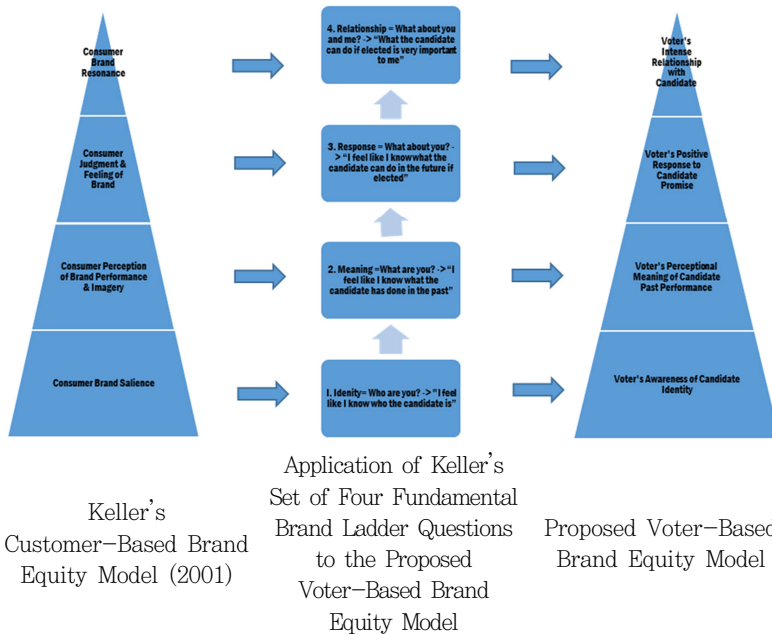
The last stage of the brand equity model is to achieve a brand relationship that resonates with "what kind of association and how much of a connection I would like to have with you." This is the stage in which customers' attitudes and preferences about a brand intensify, leading them to develop a strong loyalty association and connection with the brand (Keller 2001, 5). In a political context, at this stage political candidates intend to build a strong interactive relationship with voters, and voters develop deep attachment to a particular candidate for consistent political support understating why and how much the candidate's winning is important to them based on relational equity they have had with the candidate. Like Apple and Harley-Davidson that have been followed by a great number of loyal customers for a significant time period (Holt 2004; Keller 2001, 16), Presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, who have been consistently mentioned as role models by presidential candidates and timelessly loved by American people, are the best examples of politicians who achieved strong brand associations and relationships with voters (see Figure 1).

In the brand value or equity ladder, political candidates need to gradually move forward from establishing their political identities and crafting their political meaning to creating a loyalty connection and

association with the voters to win their elections. As Keller (2001) emphasized, the success of brand equity building depends on how consumers respond rather than on how effectively and efficiently brand-building processes were designed. It is important to understand what voters learn and feel about different political candidates and how much they respond to and support for different candidacies. This voter-oriented relational brand equity model, based on voters' subjective but thoroughly digested perceptions of political candidates, can provide a reliable and consistent theoretical approach to understanding the gradual process and outcome of sequential but dynamic political brand building and battles (see Figure 1).

By incorporating Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, this study examines sequentially televised political debates to see whether the deliberate cumulative political messages can help political candidates build levels of relational brand equity with voters and establish their brand values in voters' minds to reach the point of gaining voters' loyalty support.

Figure 1. The Pyramid Flow Chart of the Proposed Voter-Based Brand Equity Model



Theoretical Implications of the Sequentially Televised Presidential Debates

Participating in televised presidential debates is the most salient campaign strategy used by candidates, and the debates are the most widely viewed political campaign events (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003; Drew and Weaver 1991; Kraus 2011). For example, the viewers of the first presidential debate in the 2012 general election reached 67 million viewers (Nielsen 2012). Kraus (1988) found that about 60% of voters said that televised debates were more helpful in deciding whom to vote for than TV news or TV ads. According to

Boydston et al. (2013), 8% of debate watchers actually changed their voting choice after viewing a televised presidential debate during the 2012 general election (Boydston et al. 2013).

A wide range of research has examined the effects of televised presidential debates, but has had mixed findings and arguments. For instance, Benoit, Hansen, and Verser (2003) argued that televised presidential debates can set important issue agendas for an election and change voters' perceptions of the candidates' personalities. Zhu, Milavsky, and Briswas (1994), however, found that voters learn more about candidates' issue positions than anything else. In spite of some variations in their findings, both studies by Benoit et al. and Zhu et al. agreed that televised presidential debates help lesser-known challengers more than well-known incumbents by introducing challengers' personalities and images to voters but mostly reinforcing incumbents' preexisting traits in the minds of voters. In addition, Benoit and Hansen's later study (2004) found that the televised debates increase voters' levels of political information and reinforce preexisting preference and attitudes. Holbert (2005) reconfirmed the thesis that viewing debates reinforces preexisting political attitudes such as party identification. These studies imply that televised debates can benefit lesser-known challengers more in the earlier stages of brand building by introducing challenger candidates' political identities and images, but eventually intensify existing political perceptions of, and attitudes toward, both challenger and incumbent candidates with more debate exposure toward the later stages of the campaign, and thus lead to increasing benefits for both lesser-known challenger and better-known incumbent candidates in the end. Moreover, Geer (1988)

added that debate exposure has a more significant effect on undecided voters than on voters who already have preexisting preferences. The majority of these debate studies were conducted based on ad-hoc theoretical approaches analyzing candidates' strategies in a single or one-time debate, neither initiating the studies from audience-sided post-hoc perspectives nor tracing the gradual effects of a series of the debates.

Despite the fixed exogenous system of a series of televised debates in the contemporary U.S. election and the importance of voters' endogenous perceptual changes by the course of televised debate series, the effect of the sequentially televised presidential debates has not been sufficiently explored, especially from voters' perspectives, for there to be reliable and valid theories and models to measure the gradual changes and outcomes of the cumulative campaign messages. Although limited research has been done, there are a number of relevant studies that can provide sparse, implied, and heuristic effects of the sequentially televised presidential debates.

There has been research on the effects of repeated positive and negative political information. For example, repeated exposure to positive campaign messages induces more positive voters' evaluations of the target candidates (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989), and repeated exposure to negative campaign messages, such as attack advertisements, increases voters' negative attitudes toward not only the target candidates but also elections in general (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996; Kaid et al. 2007). Some studies examined the effects of short- and long-term political information exposure. For instance, even though there are mixed results for short- or long-term campaign

effects, short-term campaign information exposure has not been shown to be enough to change voters' attitudes or perceptions due to voters' preexisting opinions, levels of knowledge, and demographic characteristics (Bartles 1993). However, the amount and frequency of exposure to campaign information about political candidates over the campaign period are crucial factors that determine voters' attitudes toward those candidates (Jones 1998, 404-406).

In addition, there have been studies that measure the persuasion effects of repeated political messages combined with other moderating and mediating factors. Jones (1998) found that the old-fashioned style of candidates' visits increases voters' political participation, and the frequency and timing of visits enhance campaign effects. He emphasized the efficient allocation of campaign resources to achieve timely and appropriate cumulative campaign effects. He also found that cumulative message exposure achieves different levels of success depending on partisan lines. For instance, Democratic candidates' visits are more likely to increase overall voting turnout and Democratic voters are more likely to respond to such campaign exposure than the Republican candidates and voters (Jones 1998). Cacioppo and Petty (1989) argued that repeated messages increase persuasion effects, but the effects of repeated messages interact with other factors such as the quality of the argument.

In an experimental study of multi-dimensional attitude changes, Barnett and his colleagues found that the perceived distance between different candidates increases and the volume of perceived dimensions among difference factors, such as party identifications and issue stances, expands due to "increased clarification" with increasing

campaign information (Barnett et al. 1976, 238). Utilizing time-series analyses, Shaw (1999) added that the weekly accumulation of campaign information can strengthen voters' preexisting attitudes or preferences, but it is less likely to change the direction of support. However, the perceptual space of conceptual dimensions among political factors would also "shrink as the election drew near" due to the increased salience of the political processes and issues (Barnett et al. 1976, 238). Therefore, their studies proposed opposite and mixed projections. More directly looking into the effects of sequentially televised presidential debates, Yun and her colleagues (2010, 2016) found that the debate effects are bound by voters' geographical contexts: debate viewers in blue states learn more about Democratic Party candidates, debate viewers in red states learn more about Republican Party candidates, and the tendency gets stronger as the debate exposure increases.

A majority of studies have found that the effects of cumulative exposure to campaign messages are contingent on other general political systems, specific election circumstances, and demographic factors, such as party identification, age, and ethnicity. Therefore, no consistent finding about the cumulative effects of a series of televised debates has been well established with a comprehensive theoretical approach. Utilizing Keller's stepwise Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, the current study develops and proposes a new model of Voter-Based Candidate Brand Equity, and traces the gradual effects of the sequentially televised presidential debates on candidate brand value building in voters' minds from the more thorough post-hoc perspective of the voters.

Hypotheses

From Keller's rationale of the sequential processes of relational brand equity building between the brand senders and the brand receivers in the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (2001), the following hypotheses are posited in order to test the application of Keller's model to the new Voter-Based Candidate Brand Equity model and examine the gradual effects of sequential televised political debates.

- H1: Televised political debates build levels of relational brand equity between voters and candidates.
- H2: Multiple televised political debates heighten levels of relational brand equity between voters and candidates.
- H3: Sequential televised political debates build gradual relational brand equity between voters and candidates.
- H4: Televised political debates benefit challengers more than incumbents in the earlier stages of identity and meaning equity building, and sequential televised political debates intensify both incumbents' and challengers' relational brand equity with voters in the later stages of response and relationship equity building.

Research Design and Method

Three presidential debates that were televised live from 9:00–10:30 p.m. (EST) on October 3, October 16, and October 22 of 2012,

sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates, were used as stimuli for the quasi-experimental panel research. The study participants were assigned into seven different groups over the course of the 2012 televised presidential debates: the first group was exposed to only the first live debate ($n = 255$); the second group was exposed to only the second live debate ($n = 265$); the third group was exposed to only the third live debate ($n = 326$); the fourth group was exposed to only the first and second live debates ($n = 132$); the fifth group was exposed to only the first and third live debates ($n = 142$); the sixth group was exposed to only the second and third live debates ($n = 146$); and the seventh group was exposed to all three live debates ($n = 196$). There was also a control group that was never exposed to any of the debates ($n = 18$). The participants watched the debates in real time, in lab settings, on university campuses, and filled out the questionnaires before and after the exposure to the live debates.

In this quasi-experimental panel study design, participants' additional campaign information exposures in their daily lives beyond the repeated measures experiments were controlled for the purpose of hypothesis tests in the effects of the cumulative exposure mainly to the sequentially televised debates. In the pre-tests, participants who reported that they watched the debates any other time over the course of the panel experimental study were excluded from the analyses, and only those who answered that they were rarely exposed to other types of the campaign messages, such as political ads, debate commentaries, social media posts, talk radio shows, and political discussions with other people, were selected for the tests. Then, the

participants were recategorized into four groups: a group with no debate exposure, a group with exposure to only one debate, a group with exposure to only two debates, and a group with exposure to all three debates. These four groups with different degrees of debate exposure were compared.

In addition, the panel group that viewed all three live presidential debates was independently examined again to trace the gradual changes in voters' perceptions of the candidates' brand building by the sequential debate exposure. In the repeated measures tests, the individual differences, such as demographics and political predispositions, are not part of consideration since the tests measure the changes within each individual, not between individuals, in the course of the experiments (Gravetter and Wallnau 2012). Therefore, those mediating or affecting factors, such as age, party affiliation, and political knowledge that have been concerns for measuring effects of a specific debate in independent random sample group comparisons (Jamieson 2015; McKinney and Carlin 2004), were cleared by the analyses testing the gradual changes within individuals not the differences between individuals in this study.

Measures

To test how the sequentially televised presidential debates helped the candidates gradually and intensively build their brand values up to the point of getting strong and consistent support from voters, Keller's (2001) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model was adopted. The exact wording of the questions asked at each step of Keller's brand equity model was directly used for the measurement

question at each stage of relational political brand equity building. In Keller's model, "identity" represents "who are you?"; "meaning" indicates "what are you?"; "response" connotes "what about you?"; and "relationship" implies "what about you and me?" (Keller 2001, 7). In the current study on analyzing political candidates' brand value building processes, the researcher asked the participants in the experiment to express a degree of agreement to four sequential statements for identity, meaning, response, and relationship: "I feel like I know who the candidate is" for the measurement of political identity; "I feel like I know what the candidate has done in the past" for the measurement of political meaning; "I feel like I know what the candidate can do in the future if elected or re-elected" for the measurement of political response; and "what the candidate can do if elected or re-elected is very important to me" for the measurement of political relationship (see Figure 1). This single constructive but open measure in each gradual stage of the brand equity building better meets the theoretical purpose of a post-hoc approach derived from voters' multi-dimensional candidate assessments where voters' perceptual parameters are unbounded than an index type of pre-fixed ad-hoc indicators that constrain the boundaries of voters' perceptual candidate assessments. The degree of agreement to each statement was measured on a scale of 7: from 1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-somewhat disagree, 4-have no opinion, 5-somewhat agree, 6-agree, to 7-strongly agree.

These perceptual agreements with the statements were asked about both incumbent and challenger presidential candidates, Obama and Romney, who participated in the sequentially televised debates

sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates in the 2012 presidential election. After exposure to each real-time presidential debate, the respondents were asked to express their degrees of perceptions about both candidates' identities, meanings, responses, and relationships separately. This new model application would help us understand the gradual stages of candidate brand value building at the end but the peak of campaign over the entire course of the televised presidential debates when the two major party candidates officially confront each other in the same stage for their brand battles.

Sample

The panel experiment participants were recruited from 19 different university campuses across liberal, conservative, and swing states as part of a collaborative data collection project during the 2012 presidential campaign and election (see Appendix). The recruitment was combined with civic engagement drives, and the participation in the study was voluntary. Although there are scholarly debates about a lower reliability using college student samples, earlier studies proved that the effect sizes of the analysis significance for the samples were consistent across different age groups especially in quasi-experimental research designs with pre-post intervention test formats to do repeated measures tests for nonequivalent group comparisons (Benoit et al. 2003; Kenny 1975). The total valid number of participants in the panel study was 723. Of the total sample, 38.9% ($n = 281$) were Republicans, 32.4% ($n = 234$) were Democrats, and 22.7% ($n = 164$) were Independents. Sixty percent ($n = 434$) of the participants were

female and 33.2% (n = 240) were male. Out of the sample, 67.8% (n = 490) were White, 8% (n = 58) were Hispanic, 5.5% (n = 40) were Black, 5% (n = 36) were Asian, and 7.5% (n = 54) were other minorities. The percentages for each demographic factor did not add up to 100% due to missing cases with unanswered questions. The mean age for the sample was 21 years old.

There were 196 study participants who viewed all three debates and completed the questionnaire before and afterward, 307 who watched any two of the debates and completed the questionnaire, and 190 who viewed only one of the three debates and completed the questionnaire. As a control group, there were 18 participants who completed the questionnaire without ever being exposed to any of the debates. In the first stage of analysis, the four groups with different degrees of debate exposure were compared to see whether the frequency of debate exposure determined the level of candidate brand value building. In the second stage of analysis, the group that was exposed to all three debates was analyzed separately in order to observe the gradual process of candidates' relational brand equity building in voters' minds over the course of the three televised presidential debates.

Results

This study predicted that exposure to televised political debates could build a level of relational brand equity between voters and candidates, and that sequential exposure to the debates gradually

intensified the level of relational equity. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was used in combination with Tukey-Kramer and Games-Howell Post-Hoc tests, which adjust for different sample sizes, in order to compare the effects of the frequency of exposure to the televised presidential debates. In the result report, this study admits the controversies regarding a significant value of p at the Alpha value of .10, but the weak p -values related to small and unbalanced sample sizes in valid tests have been still accepted in academia and the findings were discussed (Cramer and Howitt 2004). The tests confirmed that the debates created a level of relational brand equity between candidates and voters, and more exposure to the debates helped the political candidates build more intense political brand values in voters' minds.

Obama, as the incumbent of the 2012 presidential election, was already familiar to the voters. The exposure to the televised political debates did not help much to rebuild his identity or meaning about his work history, but it did reconnect him with his voters, and those who viewed the debates felt they knew what Obama could do in the future if he were to be reelected ($F[3, 690] = 3.088, p \leq 0.027$). Although the post-hoc test results were somewhat weak ($p \leq 0.10$), the participants who viewed at least two of the debates were more likely to learn about what Obama could do and respond to his potentials and promises than people with no debate exposure. However, the multiple debate exposure did not lead to further relational equity building between Obama and the voters beyond voters' response to his messages, and it was not sufficient to persuade voters to see why his reelection would be important enough

to them to give him consistent political support (see Table 1 and Graph 1).

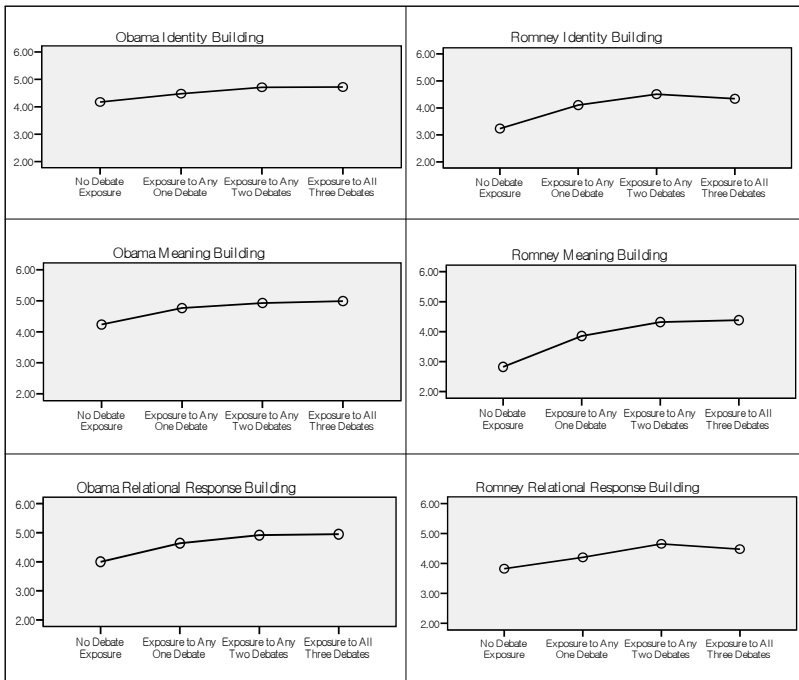
Romney, as the challenger in the 2012 presidential election, was able to build his identity in voters' minds ($F[3, 692] = 5.102, p \leq 0.002$), tell his work history and meaning to the voters ($F[3, 692] = 8.081, p \leq 0.001$), and bring out a degree of response to his future promises from the voters ($F[3, 688] = 3.779, p \leq 0.010$) through the sequentially televised political debates. According to the post-hoc tests, people needed to be exposed to at least two debates in order to learn who Romney was ($p \leq 0.05$), what he had done ($p \leq 0.05$), and what he could do ($p \leq 0.05$). However, like Obama, Romney also failed to reach a level of strong relational association with his voters through the debates, and the debates alone were not enough to demonstrate why his winning was important to the voters to get their support. (see Table 1 and Graph 1).

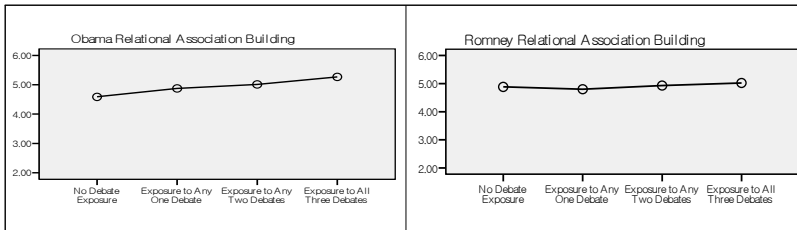
Table 1. The Frequency of Televised Political Debate Exposure and Candidates' Relational Brand Equity Building

Debate Exposure	Obama			
	Identity	Meaning	Response**	Relationship
No Exposure	M=4.18 (SE=,38)	M=4.24 (SE=,36)	M=4.00 (SE=,38)	M=4.59 (SE=,42)
Exposure to One Debate	M=4.48 (SE=,11)	M=4.77 (SE=,11)	M=4.64 (SE=,12)	M=4.88 (SE=,13)
Exposure to Two Debates	M=4.71 (SE=,09)	M=4.93 (SE=,09)	M=4.92 (SE=,09)*	M=5.01 (SE=,10)
Exposure to Three Debates	M=4.72 (SE=,11)	M=4.99 (SE=,11)	M=4.95 (SE=,11)*	M=5.27 (SE=,13)
*** p ≤ .01; ** p ≤ .05; * p ≤ .10	F[3, 691] = 1,509, F[3, 691] = 1,911, F[3, 690] = 3,088, F[3, 686] = 2,037, p ≤ .211 p ≤ .126 p ≤ .027 p ≤ .107			

	Romney			
	Identity ^{***}	Meaning ^{***}	Response ^{**}	Relationship
No Exposure	M=3,24 (SE=,39)	M=2,82 (SE=,40)	M=3,82 (SE=,40)	M=4,88 (SE=,44)
Exposure to One Debate	M=4,10 (SE=,12)	M=3,85 (SE=,12)	M=4,20 (SE=,12)	M=4,80 (SE=,13)
Exposure to Two Debates	M=4,51 (SE=,09) ^{**}	M=4,32 (SE=,09) ^{**}	M=4,65 (SE=,10) ^{**}	M=4,93 (SE=,10)
Exposure to Three Debates	M=4,34 (SE=,12) ^{**}	M=4,39 (SE=,12) ^{**}	M=4,48 (SE=,12) ^{**}	M=5,02 (SE=,13)
^{***} $p \leq .01$; $F[3, 692] = 5,102$, $F[3, 692] = 8,081$, $F[3, 688] = 3,779$, $F[3, 690] = ,476$, ^{**} $p \leq .05$; $p \leq ,002$ $p \leq ,001$ $p \leq ,010$ $p \leq ,699$ [*] $p \leq ,10$				

Graph 1. The Frequency of Televised Political Debate Exposure and Candidates' Relational Brand Equity Building





Repeated measures ANOVA and contrast tests were used to examine how cumulative exposure to the sequentially televised presidential debates gradually establishes relational brand equity between political candidates and voters. It was found that the political candidates were able to reach a high enough level of relational equity to get voters' response to what they could do and make their voters feel something about their political qualifications, but not to the point where they would guarantee strong connection with and consistent loyal support from voters during the sequence of the three televised presidential debates.

Obama's cumulative debate performance engraved his political identity in voters' minds even deeper over the course of the debate series ($F[2, 124] = 4.712, p \leq 0.001$), and significant relearning about his political identity occurred when voters viewed the second debate after having previous exposure to the first debate ($F[1, 62] = 8.958, p \leq 0.004$), but the relational brand equity did not increase much by viewing the third debate after having exposure to the first two debates. However, voters' understanding of Obama's political brand meaning, based on his previous political work history, did not change significantly as a result of watching the sequential debates, although the contrast test detected a weak but noticeable increase in voters' learning

about Obama's meaning by viewing the third debate after exposure to both the first and second debates ($F[1, 61] = 3.406, p \leq 0.070$). More importantly, by watching the third debate after viewing both the first and second debates ($F[1, 61] = 4.416, p \leq 0.040$), voters were able to respond to Obama. They responded to his political promises and expressed a level of interactive feelings about him ($F[2, 122] = 2.908, p \leq 0.058$). Nonetheless, via the subsequent debates, Obama was unable to build a level of strong relational association and connection with the voters to persuade them why his reelection was important to them to get further political support (see Table 2 and Graph 2).

Through the cumulative debate exposure, voters also learned Romney's political identity ($F[2, 124] = 4.728, p \leq 0.011$). Voters gradually learned who he was by viewing the second debate after exposure to the first debate ($F[1, 62] = 4.166, p \leq 0.045$), and they learned even more from the third debate after watching both the first and second debates ($F[1, 62] = 5.183, p \leq 0.026$). Again, although the results of the statistical significance tests were somewhat weak but still significant at the Alpha level of .10, the viewers learned about Romney's political meaning through cumulated information by watching the sequential debates ($F[2, 124] = 2.483, p \leq 0.088$) after exposure to both the first and second debates ($F[1, 62] = 2.804, p \leq 0.099$), and they reacted and responded to his political promises and values ($F[2, 124] = 2.519, p \leq 0.085$) after viewing all three debates ($F[1, 62] = 3.369, p \leq 0.071$). However, as it was for Obama, Romney's sequential brand building efforts over the course of the sequential debates did not help him build a level of intense relational association with the voters that was high enough to get

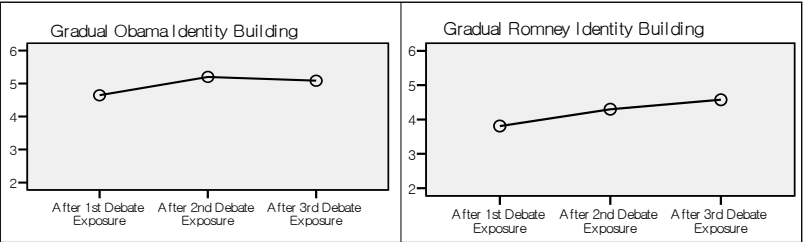
their loyal support (see Table 2 and Graph 2).

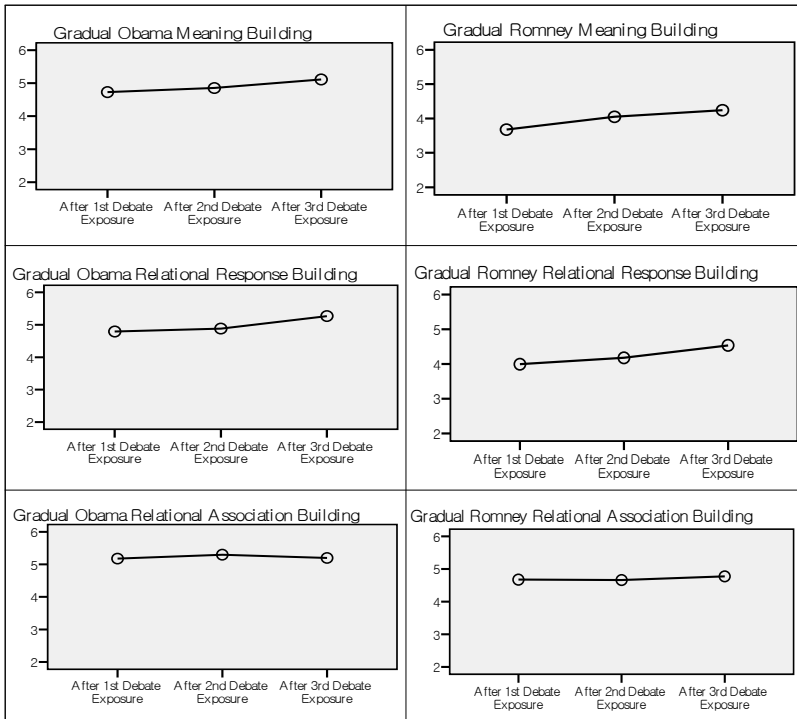
Table 2. The Effects of Sequential Televised Political Debate Exposure on Candidates' Gradual Relational Brand Equity Building

Cumulative Debate Exposure	Obama			
	Identity ^{***}	Meaning	Response [*]	Relationship
After 1st Debate	M=4.64 (SE=,24)	M=4.73 (SE=,27)	M=4.79 (SE=,26)	M=5.18 (SE=,28)
After 2nd Debate	M=5.20 (SE=,25) ^{***}	M=4.85 (SE=,27)	M=4.88 (SE=,26)	M=5.30 (SE=,26)
After 3rd Debate	M=5.08 (SE=,25)	M=5.11 (SE=,26) [*]	M=5.27 (SE=,24) ^{**}	M=5.20 (SE=,27)
^{***} p ≤ .01; ^{**} p ≤ .05; [*] p ≤ .10	F[2, 124] = 4.712, p ≤ .001	F[2, 122] = 1.933, p ≤ .149	F[2, 122] = 2.908, p ≤ .058	F[2, 124] = .186, p ≤ .830

	Romney			
	Identity ^{**}	Meaning [*]	Response [*]	Relationship
After 1st Debate	M=3.81 (SE=,30)	M=3.68 (SE=,28)	M=3.99 (SE=,28)	M=4.67 (SE=,31)
After 2nd Debate	M=4.30 (SE=,27) ^{**}	M=4.05 (SE=,26) [*]	M=4.18 (SE=,27)	M=4.66 (SE=,28)
After 3rd Debate	M=4.58 (SE=,27) ^{**}	M=4.24 (SE=,27) [*]	M=4.54 (SE=,28) [*]	M=4.78 (SE=,28)
^{***} p ≤ .01; ^{**} p ≤ .05; [*] p ≤ .10	F[2, 124] = 4.728, p ≤ .011	F[2, 124] = 2.483, p ≤ .088	F[2, 124] = 2.519, p ≤ .085	F[2, 122] = .137, p ≤ .872

Graph 2. The Effects of Sequential Televised Political Debate Exposure on Candidates' Gradual Relational Brand Equity Building





In conclusion, the televised presidential debates built levels of candidates' brand values in voters' minds and established relational brand equity between the voters and the candidates. The debates benefited the challenger more than the incumbent at least in identity and meaning equity building. Regardless of candidacy status, a more frequent and gradual exposure to the debates intensified the level of relational equity between the voters and the candidates to the point where voters learned about candidates' identities and meanings and responded to the candidates' messages, but the sequential debates were not salient or powerful enough to build a intense relational association between the voters and the candidates and to provide the

importance of the candidates' winning of the election to voters.

Discussion

This study found that televised presidential debates help political candidates build their political identities, meanings, and qualifications; however, the sequential campaign communication strategy does not guarantee that they actually earn consistent supports from and strong connections with voters. Televised debates can give voters the opportunity to learn who the candidates are and understand what they have done and can do, but the debates cannot be a sufficient method to reach out to build intense loyalty from the voters, build relational association with them, and persuade them why a certain candidate's winning of the election is important to them. The limited effects of the sequentially televised debates have been reported and supported by other scholars (Benoit et al. 2003; Benoit and Hansen 2004; Holbert 2005). Ostrow (1982) and other marketing scholars have provided the reasons that the campaign message has a significant effect on awareness and recall, but the effects become significantly weaker when the brands or target subjects come to the stage to get attitudes and actual supports (Cannon, Leckenby, and Abernethy 2002, 17).

Unlike the traditional wisdom that the first debate in the series is the most powerful in learning about candidates' issues and images (Holbrook 1999, 71; Sears and Chaffee 1979, 110), this study found that any two of the sequential debates were needed to build political

candidates' brand values along the dimensions of identity, meaning, and response over the courses of the campaigns. A single viewing of one presidential debate did not give voters much of an opportunity to learn about the candidates. Voters need to be exposed to at least two presidential debates to start learning about who the candidate is, what he did, and what he can do. In other words, there should be at least two different chances for voters to evaluate candidates through sequentially televised debates in order to make any change in a campaign. This result is consistent with brand building theories of marketing. According to the classic S-curve model, a one-time message does not provide much opportunity for persuasion. The effect of the first message achieves a minor 5% recognition response, but the second and third messages reach double and exponential amounts (12% and 25%) of recognition responses (Cannon et al. 2002). Repeated exposure to a message increases its effects, and the second and third exposures seem necessary to build a level of brand equity and move up to a further stage along the brand building ladder.

Finally, this study confirmed that well-known incumbents and lesser-known challengers have different starting lines in the brand building race and different levels of comparative advantage at each stage of the brand building process. A number of studies have found that incumbents have the advantage in presidential elections, and about 70% of the time they have defeated the challengers because their names and work experiences were already known to the voters (Gelman and King 1990; Ma 2011; Weeks 2012). In other words, through the televised debates, well-known incumbent presidents are

less likely to add to and rebuild their political identities and characters in voters' minds, and voters are less likely to learn more about well-known incumbents' image and personality in campaigns. However, the debates can provide a greater opportunity for a challenger, whose political identity and history are less known to voters, to build and create his or her political identity and meaning as a new person in a new office (Benoit and Hansen 2004; Zhu et al. 1994). The result of this study reconfirmed the argument: as an incumbent, Obama's political identity and work history were already known, and viewing the three debates did not help much to rebuild or reinforce his political identity and meaning. It could not change voters' perceptions about who he was and what he had done. In contrast, as the challenger, Romney benefited from the debates to build his political identity and meaning, the first two initial stages of the brand equity building. According to Keller (2001), brand relationships cannot be established without brand responses, responses cannot occur without meaning, and meaning cannot be achieved without brand identities. This study has confirmed that political candidates also need to build their brand value in a sequential manner. Although incumbents start ahead, sequential debates provide opportunities for challengers to catch up, and for both incumbents and challengers to move further in their relational brand value building.

Previous studies have argued that voters have different party affiliations, various levels of preexisting political information and experience, and different chances of political information exposure, and that these factors mediate the effects of the sequentially televised

presidential debates (McKinney and Carlin 2004). However, the final outcome of how much further and intensively a political candidate can reach up the ladder of relational brand equity building depends on how their debate performances are perceived by the voters. In understanding the effects of the sequentially televised presidential debates on candidate brand value building, taking into account the subjective post-hoc perceptions of voters can be a more comprehensive, reliable, and consistent mechanism rather than devising ad-hoc theoretical arguments about different contextual and demographic factors, which often leads to mixed conclusions about political branding and campaign effects. This voter-oriented post-hoc approach contributes to filling gaps in the continuum of political communication process, which have often been left unexplained by ad-hoc candidate- or information source-oriented perspectives.

Once the theoretical application of the Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model is accepted in the field of the political communication research, more thorough measurement tests and further theoretical connections to specific political behavior, such as voting, are required for the theory to be well established and valued in the field. Moreover, making a theoretical connection between the model and tangible political behaviors or specific attitudinal attributes would significantly contribute to understanding the gradual process of political perceptions, evaluations, and outcomes. Lastly, in order to apply the Keller's theory to a broader picture of American campaign and candidate brand building beyond debate research, it would be useful to trace back to the beginning of a campaign or the beginning of a candidate's political career to observe when voters initially

establish candidates' political identities and move further up to the brand equity ladder of meaning, response, and association. In conclusion, the Keller's theory has a great potential to provide both scholars and practitioners an opportunity to discover unexplored processes of political communication, however the application of the theory and its measurement tests need to be replicated in various political contexts even beyond American campaigns by future studies to add to its reliability and validity.

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Appendix

List of university campuses for recruitment

Auburn University; Dominican University; Emerson College; Georgia College; Iowa State University; Ithaca College; Marquette University; Ohio University; Portland State University; Radford University; Rhodes College; Texas State University; University of Akron; University of Georgia; University of Kansas; University of Memphis; University of Miami; University South Florida St. Petersburg; Virginia Tech

Abstract

Selling Political Brands and Building Candidate Relational Equity in American Campaign Tournaments

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The current study explored whether political candidates' brand building through sequential campaign messages establishes degrees of candidates' relational equity with voters in American politics. Adopting Keller's sequential Customer-Based Brand Equity model, the current study developed the Voter-Based Candidate Brand Equity model to observe how American voters and candidates exchange political brand equity through candidates' sequential branding. Over the course of the 2012 televised American presidential debates, three sequential panel experiments found that the candidates' cumulative brand building created their political identities in voters' minds, sent their political meanings to voters, and brought out voters' responses to their campaign promises. However, candidate branding through the sequentially televised debates alone did not achieve a level of intense relational association with voters to secure their loyalty support. This voter-oriented post-hoc approach explains the progressive campaign effects that have been left unanswered by traditional ad-hoc candidate-oriented perspectives and theories.

Key Words

American campaign; political relational brand equity; voter-based candidate brand equity model; voter-oriented post-hoc approach; televised presidential debates